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### Acting without expectations.

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ACTING WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS

By

Gary L. Brice  
B.A., Western Illinois University, 2009

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Ky

May 2012

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Certification of Approval on

April 12, 2012

By the following Thesis Committee:

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Thesis Director, Dr. Russel Vandenbroucke

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Dr. W. S. Tkweme

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Dr. Amy Steiger

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*First I would like to thank Professor Russell Vandenbroucke for his guidance. I would like to thank Professor Amy Steiger and Professor W.S. Tkweme for agreeing to be on my committee. I would also like to thank the faculty, staff and students of the University of Louisville Theatre Department.*

## DEDICATION

*To my MFA Acting class, we made it!*

## ABSTRACT

### ACTING WITHOUT EXPECTATIONS

Gary Brice

April 12, 2012

This thesis examines my preparation for performing Leland Cunningham in *Blues for an Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage. Using the motif of personal expectations, I explore how my ideas of performance have become unbalanced. I evaluate the origin of these performance expectations and discuss how they influenced this particular process. After considering my early career, graduate school experience, and character preparation, I use the final chapter to explore the debilitating nature of these expectations. I consider how and why I can no longer accept this frame work of unrealistic performance expectations; and how through this process I have reconsidered pursuing acting as a primary career but as meaningful art.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is more than a requirement for a Master's Degree in performance from the University of Louisville. It is more than a neatly polished introspective body of writing outlining one actor's approach to playing Leland Cunningham in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. It is more than the hours of rehearsal and preparation leading up to performance day. It is more, even still, than seven months spent writing. It is more because it is all. It is all because it is more.

This thesis includes the exact moment I knew I wanted to act. It includes moment I realized I did not want to act professionally. Mostly, it is expectations. It is every moment of actor training I have experienced. It is religion, academia, performance, technique, dedication, and talent. It is me.

It is a requirement for all University of Louisville graduate Theatre Arts acting candidates. It is one of my most significant pieces of writing. It is an actor's approach. It *is* my approach. It is more. It is a critical analysis of the preparation for this character, Leland Cunningham, from the perspective of third year Master of Fine Arts in Performance candidate Gary Lynn Brice II. Thus, it is first and foremost a critical analysis about me as a performer.

When actors perform they mostly have themselves at their disposal. They have their sense of being, training, and experience as foundation for any character. When the actor acts, he takes the character as it is on the page and he fastens it to himself. He is

himself playing the character and nothing else. He creates the illusion that he is the character. He is himself first, and himself as the character second. He is never the actual character.

He has his body, but he changes it to suggest something about the character. He has his voice, but he alters it to highlight the character's vocal patterns. The choices the actor makes, and the ways they coordinate the integration of body and voice, create a unique interpretation of a character. Because the actor first has himself at his disposal in this critical analysis, *I*, the writer, will access and discuss myself, as a person, actor, and finally as a person performing Leland Cunningham in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*.

In this self-analysis, I have made many observations. I have discovered that among my acting experiences, I have always had expectations. Some were reasonable and realistic. Some were toxic and debilitating. This process has made me aware that at times, toxic expectations took precedence over reasonable expectations.

What happens when those expectations are *not* met? What is a reasonable expectation? What happens when expectations *are* met? How does the actor cope? Should actors expect praise after a performance? Beyond praise, should actors expect to perform well? How do actors know if they have done well at all? What should actors expect of themselves, their director, their fellow actors and their immediate theatre community? Why do actors act and for whom do they act? In this thesis I will discuss these topics as they pertain to my preparation of Leland Cunningham in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*.

## SECTION ONE

### Expectations of an Ego

*Gus Edwards: The ego, as described in various dictionaries, is, A, the part of the psyche that is conscious, controls thought and behavior, and is most in touch with external reality and, B an exaggerated sense of self-importance, conceit. It is or can be very important to an actor. What does it mean to you in terms of actors acting?*

*Douglas Turner Ward: Actors must be realistic with who they are and how good they are. They must be accurate about that, and if they are right they have every right to be egotistical about how good they are. Once you are secure in that then in truth you will have no ego when you approach the work. Because then you are so good that you are ready to lend yourself to the demands of the work and to fit into it in whatever way necessary.<sup>1</sup>*

### Why I act

I love acting. And I have been attracted to acting because I have been good at acting. The first time I took acting seriously was coincidentally the first time I had ever felt exceptional. I get a surge of energy and a rush of excitement when I perform. As the Chinese might say, my chi feels stimulated when I act. Ironically, the expectations of my ego have been met through acting.<sup>2</sup>

Acting is fun. The most fun I have had in the last seven years was usually while acting. When I act I can forget about everything. My only job when I am performing is to make sure my audience is satisfied. I would like to expand because I do not mean to assert that my only objective in performance is audience satisfaction. It is not.

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<sup>1</sup> Ward, Douglas Turner., and Gus Edwards. *Advice to a Young Black Actor (and Others): Conversations with Douglas Turner Ward*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Chi, to the Chinese, is vital life energy. One must let go of the ego in order to take in more chi.

However, when the curtain goes up, who is the show for? Is the show for the audience, or is it for the actors? Is it for the producers, the director, the lighting, scenic and, costume designers or the audience? It is for all, but it is primarily for the audience. I enjoy entertainment. The play is for the people and the people want to be entertained.

I have gotten to do what seems like everything on stage. I have played a twelve-year-old. I have played seventy. I have played lovers, haters, aliens, and animals. I have played women, trees, bees and kings. On stage I have the opportunity to step out of the monotony of everyday life performance, and into staged theatrical performance.

When it calls for it, I can be as batty, as loud, as funny, as emotionally charged, as smart, as stupid, and as honest as I choose to be. I consider myself to be a very creative person, and acting is a way for me to constantly flex my creative muscles. It satisfies the expectations of my ego, an ego that is lively, animated and energetic. It is an ego that expects attention and desires praise. For these reasons acting has satisfied my ego. By nature I am a dramatic person. I have an over-the-top lively personality, and acting is medium for me to take that personality to the next level. It is an outlet for that personality.

Acting makes me focus. When I am on stage the only thing that truly matters is my objective and my scene partner. I am willing to admit that sometimes it is hard for me to turn off the noise in my head. Having a lively imagination, I think a lot. Thinking too much traps creative energy in my head. Acting helps me project it out in to the world.

## **The Expectations**

I am my ego. As I look back on my performance in *Blues*, I am confident that I developed a solid character. I expected everyone to feel the same. The Leland I created was nothing like the Gary Brice people see on an everyday basis. I tend to walk with my knees leading; Leland led with his forehead. The sound in my mouth is often muffled because I do not usually engage the back of my tongue and soft palate; the Leland I created spoke with a clearer tone of voice. My dialect is influenced by a mixture of Arkansas; St. Louis; Alton, Illinois; Macomb, Illinois; Chicago, Illinois and various other regions. Leland spoke with an Alabama accent at a pace much slower than my own and with a lot more clarity and articulation than I usually speak. I usually try not to allow my thoughts to read on my face; for Leland I always tried to make whatever I felt like he should be thinking read very clear on his face. I wanted to make everything simple. What you saw was what you got. As written, the character is simple and yet the character is extremely complex.<sup>3</sup> How then, were my expectations not quite met?

I consider this performance to be one of the most successful of my career. A lot of time and effort went in to the work. I believe succeeding at this was a major challenge for me as an actor. I believe I rose to that challenge. I learned more than I ever thought I would.

“I would have given it a seven out of ten,” said a friend and classmate. That is what she would have rated my performance. That is a C. When I asked why she

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A: Character Analysis

explained that she felt there were a lot of moments that looked calculated, specifically in the rocking chair scene.<sup>4</sup> This response did not satisfy my expectations of my ego.

I was not receiving feedback from my closest peers. I was anxious to know how some felt, so I asked her. Do I regret asking her? No, I do not. However, the first thing I did as I pondered her critique was remind myself that this was only one person's interpretation. She was speaking from her own reality and this was nothing more than her opinion. But it bothered me that she gave my work a C. The C is average. I sought to be exceptional. I expected to be. I wanted everyone else to think my work was exceptional. I expected them to think it. My expectations were not being met and I was bothered.

Moments in a play have to be calculated. When the curtain goes up there has to be a show. And if the director is happy with the show I am sure they want to keep the same show through the run of performance. Of course moments change and actors make discoveries in performance but for the most part a show is solidified by opening night. During the run it does not change much. The rehearsal process is the calculation period. It is where we, the actors, calculate our movements, our choices, our voices, and our objectives. It is where the production team calculates the show being put together.

*Did I agree with her then? No. Do I agree with her presently? Yes.* I do not however, grade my performance with a C. My performance *was* calculated. I calculated bold and exciting choices. Some people however, did not understand those calculations. They misinterpreted them. These calculations were not clear to that audience member, a friend. The truth is I was and am very proud of the work I did. I allowed myself to be extremely vulnerable in front of my family, my friends, my classmates, my students and

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<sup>4</sup> See Section Five: Rehearsal Expectations.

my teachers. I allowed them to see me re-enact extreme moments of life and emotion. I challenged her criticism to satisfy my ego's expectations. Justifying my choices meant I did not have to lower my expectations. I was not willing to lower them.

The overwhelming response I received regarding this performance was positive. Another close friend, not in theatre, told me that I "transformed on stage." This is how I expected people to respond. She thought that I was a completely different person onstage. One of my family members echoed this. I recall her telling me that she could not believe that that was me on stage. She said that I looked like a completely different person. She almost did not recognize me.

If I were to judge my performance based on the two previous responses, I could argue that I succeeded in creating the illusion I referred to earlier. Through close attention to detail and systematic, spontaneous, transformative gestures, rhythms, postures and presence, I was able to project my interpretation of Leland on stage. I created a character using everything I have learned in graduate school, my previous institution, and from living my life as Gary Brice. I showed the audience how, with what I have learned, I can completely manipulate myself on a stage for their entertainment. And mostly, they were entertained.

The acknowledgement and feedback I received from the student and local community was overwhelming. In the few weeks after the show I was repeatedly stopped by people I did not know telling me how much they loved and appreciated my performance in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. The expectation I set for the audience was met, I thought. My students, my family, and random strangers loved the show. For some reason my ego was not satisfied.

I was getting praise, I was getting acknowledgement, people were actively engaging me about the show, but these were not the people I was looking forward to receiving it from. With the exception of the two faculty members on my thesis committee none of the theatre faculty acknowledged, engaged, or responded to my performance. This concerned me. It baffled me. I was not willing to ask them. I wanted them to tell me; I expected them to tell me how well I did. It was the same with my classmates.

I have practically lived with them for the last one, two or three years. They were not acknowledging my work. My expectations were not being met. I was not happy. Did they not like the show? Did they not like my performance? Why were my feelings hurt? Why were people not acknowledging the show or engaging me about it for good or bad? The reality was that people were, a lot of people were. The people I expected it from the most, my graduate school community, was not and that upset me. Why was I seeking validation from these people?

It was at this moment I realized that I had existed within an unrealistic framework of expectations. If I want to act professionally, how could I possibly be upset when I did not get the reaction to my work I had anticipated? Was my reaction valid or not? Do I act for art or for ego? Was I expecting an endless barrage of praise and flattery? I wanted them to say great things. I expected them to say phenomenal things. I should not have.

Since I first started acting I have usually gotten an overwhelming amount of praise for my work. When I did not, I reacted the same way I did here. I have a supportive family that has always encouraged and enjoyed my work. If they did not like a performance they would never say. I came up acting in church. In church people are positive about any performance no matter how bad it is. Moreover, I did not have many



performance opportunities while pursuing my undergraduate degree; the roles I have played since being at UofL have not been extremely challenging. In the past, I have been lucky to not be challenged the way I was with this performance. I have usually been easily inspired by characters and the general satisfaction of the people who saw reinforced the expectation I developed for my audiences. My theatrical career has developed with little criticism.

I interpreted the lack of response from my teachers and peers as criticism. Negative criticism. I did not know for sure how they felt but I was resentful because my expectations were not met. Where did these expectations come from? Now that I am aware of them, how did they affect my preparation of this role? How much of the process did they influence?

This process has made me aware of many expectations I have developed for my theatre community. I am now cognizant of how toxic some of them can be. Is it possible for me to act without these expectations?

## SECTION TWO

### Early Expectations

*Gus Edwards: What's a actors relationship to the audience?*

*Douglas Turner Ward: ...dealing with them affects your craft, your timing, your command. They affect how you control and sometimes hold their attention. It becomes you job to change your prior calculation to fit the circumstances as long as it's reasonable. . . . An audience must cooperate enough to give us a reasonable chance then everything else is up to us. To hold their attention, to keep their attention, to respond to their coughs et cetera. To not let whatever their natural spontaneous response is throw us.<sup>55</sup>*

### **How I Got Started**

Acting has not always been my first love. Fat, effeminate, athletically-challenged black kids have it hard growing up. When I was young I was all of the above. I did not fit in with the guys, I hated the fact that I wanted to be like the girls, and I felt like I was not good at anything. I remember when I first fell in love with acting. I did not have any expectations about it. I was twelve and everything about me was awkward. It was too soon to give up on life, but I was lost. I did not have many real friends. I thought my parents hated me, and I could not play sports to save my life. It felt like my community did not have any expectations of me.

The church my family attended was prepping for the annual Christmas program which meant we children were performing speeches. I hated speeches. I hated speeches with a passion. I hated getting up in front of people. I hated memorizing. I hated dressing up. I hated everything about Christmas and Easter programs because they always meant

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<sup>55</sup> Edwards, Ward p. 69

embarrassing speeches. This year, however, was different. In an effort to boost performance enthusiasm Sister Margret, the youth director, offered a fifty dollar prize for the best speech. I hated performing, but I loved money and that fifty dollars was as good as mine! I expected to win.

I remember spending hours memorizing it. Once I had learned all the words I remember thinking to myself, if I want to win, I have to make the church believe it. I wanted to move them beyond measure. I wanted people in tears. I wanted that fifty dollars! I remember the day of the program. I was eyeing the competition trying to identify the person I needed to beat. Looking back, I was distracted by the cash prize. It was all I cared about. I was about to render a speech about the birth of Jesus Christ and I was focused on winning money. I expected to do so. Luckily, the performers before me were dismal. I knew I would succeed.

. My name was called and I took the stage. I wanted to be different so I declined usage of the microphone. I stepped out in to the middle aisle and said my speech with total perfection. Half way through I realized that the people in the audience were hanging on to every word I said. I got the biggest adrenaline rush.

I finished to thunderous applause and the whole church standing. They were blown away by my performance and I felt great. After winning the fifty dollars I became conscious of how powerful performing made me feel. For the very first time in my life, I felt that I could do something that none of the people around me could do. I could perform. And although, at the time, I did not think about performing in terms of a career choice, I knew I was good at it and I knew I had a gift that no one could take away from me.

This was the day I fell in love with acting. For the next few years I acted in all sorts of what we called “skits” at church. They were usually based on a scenario our drama instructor gave us. The scripts were very loose and we usually had to do a lot of improvisation to fill in the story line. Acting in these skits was very interesting because they always called for me to be in some extreme emotional state. Sister Margret, our instructor, was never satisfied unless she could feel an emotional connection to what we were performing. I can still hear her yelling from the back pew, “I don’t feel it! I need to feel it!” This was the only piece of direction she ever gave us.

I struggled to get where she wanted me to go until finally I would get tired of her yelling and I would explode. I would close my eyes and give the performance every bit of energy I had. I did not realize it until I started with formal acting training, but Sister Margret was teaching me to act with power, intensity, and with a strong emotional connection to the audience. The last of these is especially important.

This way of creating and performing solidified a personal expectation. I learned to expect my performance to always inspire the audience. Acting in church we had one objective. Our performance was supposed to be so inspiring that it could save sinners from their transgressions, and introduce them to Jesus Christ. We were completely invested in our audience. The point of our performance was to change something in our audience. That has stayed with me. I no longer seek to save souls with my performance, but I always seek some sort of positive change.

My first *real* play was Alton High School’s production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The only reason I use *real* the way I do is because for the longest time I considered *Shrew* my first theatrical experience. It was as if my church experiences had

never happened. The theatre at Alton High was serious: there were lights and sets and costumes and stage managers and real directors. I can remember going into my first audition thinking ‘wow, this is real theatre.’ It was at this moment my outlook on theatre changed. My expectations of what theatre needed to be changed. It was as if Brown Faith Temple Church of God in Christ had never existed. The formality of high school theatre terrified me and led me to negate church experience, which was considerable. My expectations of what theatre was, of what theatre had to be were instantaneously altered.

The two experiences were very different. The more differences I became cognizant of, the more I repressed my church experience. In high school we had scripts with actual lines. In church we had a loose concept where the actors were responsible for creating the rest of the story and making it workable. At school we had to audition. At church everyone got a part and your talent level determined how much you got to speak. Moreover, it was not always because Sister Margret gave you the biggest part. Usually it was because you could improvise the best and ended up carrying the scene. At school most theatre students were Caucasian. At church every one was African-American. My expectations of what theatre was supposed to look like were changing.

For the *Taming of the Shrew* audition we were to audition with a song verse prepared to act out for the directors. “Easy enough,” I thought I’ll just do a good gospel song and dazzle them with it.” However, as I waited to be called I was becoming less and less satisfied with my song choice. I knew that if I was not felling it then they were not going to feel it either. I probably could have performed the same song at church no questions asked. This was school and I had developed a new set of expectations. So, at

the very last minute I change my song to a popular rap song at the time by a group call Crime Mob. The song was called “Knuck if you Buck”. The Lyrics are as follows:

“Yea we knuckin’ and buckin and ready to fight!  
I betcha imma throw dem thangs so haters besta think twice.  
See me I aint nothing nice  
and Crime Mob it aint no stoppin’  
tag team like Sadam Hussein, Hitler and Osama bin Laden.  
Yea we steady gun poppin and I am acting a foo.  
I wish I hater would get mad off of this Crime Mob crew.  
Now enough is enough boy.  
Rough and get snuffed boy.  
Luck is a must boy.  
Knuck if you buck boy!”

I wonder now, what I was thinking. However, something very interesting happened after I finished it, with all the feeling I could muster. One of the directors asked me to do it again only this time like I was a kid who had come home after curfew and was apologizing to his father. Was this school or church? I could do that easily. I had been improvising like this at church for some years now and it gave me an edge, even when I did not expect it to. I did what they asked with the utmost sincerity and tried to connect to them emotionally. They were blown away when I told them I had never acted before. I had. But I did not lie because in my mind, I had not.

I earned a callback. And although reading Shakespeare was like reading a foreign language I did not care. I fell back on what I knew. Even if the words did not make any sense, the directors were going to feel what I was saying. My “first” time acting I was Gremio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. I got a lot of praise. People were amazed that I could play an old miser so well. Acting in high school was different from church but, I got the same reaction from the audience. My expectations of how people should react to my work were solidified.

As I examine me as an actor, how I got to where I am and how I approached my work in *Blues*, these expectations dominated my thought processes. Expecting to please the audience and be praised for it is essentially why I have acted. It is the same mentality I had as I approached Leland. I loved more of me in the art and less of the art in me. And this was when I started realizing that acting for me was becoming toxic.

## SECTION THREE

### Preparing Expectations

*Gus Edwards: How do you go about preparing for a role?*

*Douglas Turner Ward: When I'm preparing a role, the first thing I do is read the script several times to see intellectually, mentally, what is there. What elements of the character are already there that coincide with myself . . . It's not a question whether or not the character is a character I philosophically agree or identify with. . . . Then I begin to explore those elements where philosophically or viscerally my own conscious values differ from those of the character I'm portraying and how am I going to evoke whatever accumulations of mental and other elements I'm going to need . . .<sup>6</sup>*

#### **From Guy to Leland**

*Blues* was more than the performance of a role. It was a process of gaining a concise understanding of myself. It met me at a time in my life when I was making drastic changes. When I first found out the University would be doing *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, I approached the director, Nefertiti Burton, about the play. In November of 2010, I had expressed to her that if the play was selected I would be interested in playing Guy. I was very familiar with the play and Guy was a role I'd longed to play. In the world of the play, Guy is a thirty something year old costume designer living in 1930's Harlem. He is a notorious homosexual and it is his dream to sail to Paris and design costumes for his idol Josephine Baker.

I related to Guy in a number of ways. At this particular time I identified exclusively as homosexual. Guy is homosexual. This attribute attracted me to him the most. Also, the fact that I would have to learn to sew was appealing. I knew this was a character that I could have a lot of fun with. This character would come easily to me,

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Ward, p. 33



meaning there was a lot about him that inspired my creative self. I knew this was a part I could easily do because I had a lot in common with him. I expected to succeed unchallenged.

In April of 2011, the play was selected as a part of the 2011-2012 season. I was excited. I went to the library checked out a copy of the play and read it again. I loved the play as much as I did the first time I had read it. However, I had been doing serious soul searching. My gut feeling was that Guy was not for me.

Guy was too easy. I thought about my career at the University of Louisville and out of the four mainstage plays I have done, two of them required me to play a homosexual character. I remember thinking to myself “these people have seen me play the gay guy, twice now!” I realized that the greatest challenge was not to play Guy, but to play Leland.

I was in the process of living by a new code of personal expectations. I started going back to church. Leland was a Christian and that attracted me to him. I no longer identified as homosexual. Leland was not homosexual. That attracted me to him.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Leland was completely different from who I *used* to be. He was more like who I wanted to be. I realized that if I really wanted to challenge myself for my thesis, Leland was the character I needed to play. I expected him to make me feel like a man.

I would have to use an Alabama dialect. I would have to explore the realms of masculinity, Christianity, and female love interests in ways I had never done so on stage. Once I looked at the arc of Leland more closely, Guy did not appeal to me anymore. The next step was to talk to the director.

I was afraid to approach professor Burton about my change of heart. I expected her to say no. I allowed myself to get defeated about how to proposition her. The more I tried to convince myself to stick to my first choice the more discouraged I became. At this early point in my preparation I was resenting the character I was supposed to play. I knew I had to talk to her about it.

To my surprised she was relieved that I wanted to play Leland. She too thought Guy was not challenging enough. She said she would love to see me expand and play Leland. I do not doubt that she was content in this decision but I could tell she was a little worried. “Are you gonna be able to get rid of that neck thing you do?” she asked. “What neck thing?” I thought. But I simply said yes and thus I began my journey to Leland.

### **The Workout Plan**

Finding out in May that I would be playing Leland in February meant I had a while to start preparing. I expected to be prepared. However, the fear with having so much time was that I would trap myself into calculated character habits that I would have a hard time shaking once rehearsals started. For this reason I decided to not do much character work over the summer. Instead I devoted my summer to working out in the gym in order to develop the body I imagined a man of Leland’s background would have.

Leland grew up on a farm. Angel asks, “You keep up with the weather do you?” Leland responds, “I grew up on a farm, old habits are hard to break (p. 23).”<sup>8</sup> I did not grow up on farm. However I know that to make a farm run smooth heavy back-breaking work has to be done. Farm work involves, pushing, pulling, lifting and digging. A man of

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<sup>8</sup> Cleage, Pearl. *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1999.

twenty-eight who spent most of his life working a farm would have a physical stature to reflect that. I was not out of shape, but I did not have that body.

Prior to my workouts I would describe my body as very average. I was not small but I definitely was not big. I knew that if I wanted to look like a man who had grown up on a farm, I would have to put on a little weight. So, I came up with a eating and exercise plan. I wanted to gain 10-12 pounds.

The plan consisted of three three-week intervals that I would alternate. The first interval was my circuit interval. It was designed to give me some light cardio while also giving me muscle-toning weight training.<sup>9</sup> Once I had done this for three weeks I would rest for the weekend and switch to a free weight regiment.<sup>10</sup> On this plan, I lifted five or six days a week alternating between the upper body and lower body parts. For all exercises I did four sets and increased the weight by five pounds on sets two and three; then on set four I would go back to the initial starting weight. This method is also known as muscle confusion. Dr. Larry Van Such defines muscle confusion as, “changes in one’s workout routine every couple of weeks to prevent plateaus from occurring and to keep your muscles continually growing and responding.”<sup>11</sup> This was my workout routine until school started and I started giving other responsibilities priority.

### **The Dialect**

Because *Blues* was not scheduled to open until February of 2012, I spent the fall semester reading, researching, and listening to dialect samples. In late January of 2012 I

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B

<sup>11</sup> Such

would receive an Alabama dialect tape from voice teacher Dr. Rinda Frye. Until then I was able to find workable samples from YouTube and National Public Radio.

On YouTube I found several documentaries about Tuskegee Alabama, specifically about the Tuskegee Airmen, The Tuskegee Institute , and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. However I could not pinpoint a dialect specific to the region that I felt fit the character. What I mean is that dramatically, Leland functions as the person of extreme difference. The other characters in the play talk about how they can tell that he is from the south by the way he speaks. For this reason I wanted to play around with a dialect that was honest yet different. So, I decided to go with a more general type of Alabama. The strongest influence for my dialect was actor Lucas Black. I watched an interview he did after the movie *The Fast and Furious*. His working class Alabama accent was exactly what I was looking for, and so I borrowed heavily from his speech patterns.

### **Religious Preparations**

Prior to rehearsals, my preparation also involved going to church. Leland speaks a lot about fire in the play. He usually talks about it in terms of hell. When asked by Angel why he did not like Abyssinian Baptist he replies, “It didn’t feel much like church to me. That pastor was talking more about this world than he was the next one.” She asks what he should talk and Leland replies, “About sin and salvation, about the presence of hellfire. Reverend Horace my pastor back at home says—(p. 44).” I assume that Leland is Pentecostal. He is extremely conservative, he is very religious, and is focused on hell and after life.

I attend a Baptist church. I am not overly religious. However, I needed to be around people who were. I grew up Pentecostal but I needed a fresh perspective. So, I attended services at a local Apostolic Church. The Apostolic Church is a subcategory of the Pentecostal Church. Things were very old fashioned like Leland. The people were dressed extremely conservatively, like Leland. They were one-hundred percent unmoved in their system of belief. I gauged this from listening to their individual testimonies. I watched how people, unmoved in their faith, convinced that the rest of the world was damned to hell, worship. It helped me understand my character's faith. It allowed me to empathize.

### **Final Preparations**

Lastly, I read the play. I read it multiple times. And after a few months of reading the play, I would start reading then just skip to the Leland scenes. I would read over them without trying to superimpose any particular line readings. I practiced them with the dialect without any intention behind the words. All I wanted to do was familiarize myself with the words of the play as much as possible. This was graduate school. The last thing I wanted to do was seem like I had been wasting my time

## SECTION FOUR

### Graduate Expectations

*Douglas Turner Ward: The training of black actors today in academia and in acting schools is ass backwards...most of the schools don't even use black material. Could you imagine a bunch of actors going to a school for four years and not studying a piece of their own material? Not one character that might be reminded of their own experience or somebody they might know. And yet they're asked to do everybody else's characters. Can you imagine getting some kids out the ghetto and they start off doing Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*? Can you imagine it? That's almost laughable.<sup>12</sup>*

I knew my junior year of college I wanted to attend graduate school. I knew specifically that I wanted to attend the University of Louisville and study with the African-American Theatre Program. Then, I knew I wanted to pursue acting professionally; I did not have enough training or experience to do so. My first encounter with graduate students occurred while I attended Western Illinois University, where I received my Bachelor's Degree in Theatre Arts. At Western, I spent a significant amount of time around graduate students. Initially I considered them colossal as compared to undergraduates. They were older, they were more mature, and they were generally very talented, they got cast more; but mostly they were serious about theatre. There were rarely questions about their commitment. I held them in high esteem.

Towards the end of the fall semester of my junior year I asked Ashley Edgemon, a first year MFA Acting student, why she decided to go to grad school. She told me that

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards, Ward, p. 12

she realized as an undergraduate that she was not ready to step into the world of professional theatre. She referred to graduate school as an opportunity to develop her level of talent, do theatre, earn money, and receive a master's degree in the process. I felt the same. I still appreciated my experiences at Western. It was excellent. The facilities were fairly new; the professors were talented and passionate, knowledgeable and experienced. The problem was that I did not feel like I had gained the maturity or experience I knew I needed if I wanted to pursue acting professionally.

As excellent as Western was, the program was seriously flawed. It was a program that catered to Caucasian students. I expected them to prepare me. I learned a lot about the craft of acting at Western. Still, I needed more. I needed to work from the cannon I identified with.

I remember securing the date for my audition in to the MFA Acting program at the University of Louisville. I remember how excited I was that the graduate school process was actually starting to happen. There were so many thoughts swirling around in my head. Will they like me? What if my audition fails? I do not have a car, or money, how do I get there. As stressed out as I was about this adventure I knew I had to be creative to make it happen.

Selling my text books early earned me enough money to purchase a one-way ticket from Macomb IL, to Louisville, KY. I did not have a clue as to how I was going to get the money for a ticket back home. In fact I was on the bus, half way to Louisville, with only five dollars in my pocket, begging my father to pay for my ticket back to Macomb. He agreed and I started to breathe again. I arrived safely in Louisville, auditioned, and four months later I was enrolled as a full-time graduate student. My

decision came with ease. The admission went smoothly. I now find myself asking, how have my experiences in the graduate program influenced my acting? More specifically, how have these experiences influenced how I approached Leland. What did I expect?

### **Performance Compared to others at UofL**

The main difference between this role and others I have played at UofL, was in the expectations. Because this was my thesis I set expectations at an astronomically high level. I expected to work harder and perform better than before.

The very first play I did at the University of Louisville was *As You Like It*. I played Corrin, an old shepherd. Corrin did not have much stage time or many lines. I had played old men before, and I knew this would be a role I could do well. I excelled with little to no expectations. Leland required me to stretch myself. The only other time I had played a lead male romantic love interest was in *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage, and that performance was a major failure.<sup>13</sup>

Next I played Voice #2 in *Betty's Summer Vacation*. Again, this character was not a challenge. He was a very flamboyant homosexual man from another world who wanted to be entertained. I had had a lot of experience with flamboyant homosexual men. The characterization was effortless. Leland was the exact opposite.

Leland needed to be very masculine and quite homophobic. The challenge with Leland was to embody the ideology of a Christian conservative. Ironically, the moments where I got to be homophobic were some of my favorite. I liked the challenge of making something that is extremely offensive, judgmental and bold appear honest. People would not expect that from me.

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<sup>13</sup> I did not do extensive character work. I had issues with the dialect. I was not mature enough for the role. This is the only other acting experience where my expectations were not met.



My next roles were Miss Roj and Junie in *The Colored Museum*. Junie's piece, "Soldier with A Secret" was a monologue I had used in my repertoire for two years prior to performing it. I had had this piece in two different audition classes and so it was fairly polished from the very beginning of the rehearsal process. It was a performance that was effortless. I had never done Miss Roj before, but I had always dreamed of doing it. I was very familiar with the piece, and because I have had experiences with real life characters like Miss Roj. Again, it was a performance that I expected to come effortlessly. It did.

The last mainstage performance prior to playing Leland was that Charles Mee's *A Perfect Wedding*. James was great preparation for Leland. He gave me the opportunity to get used to playing to a female love interest on stage. I did not know when I was working on *A Perfect Wedding* that I would later be playing Leland; James helped me feel more comfortable kissing women on stage. He gave me the opportunity to play a masculine male. Although I learned a lot playing James it was not extremely challenging.

### **The Repertory Company and Studio Theatre**

I consider my experience at the University of Louisville to be unique. I have gotten the opportunity to participate in many different areas of theatre, and I strongly feel like all of these areas have influenced my acting tremendously. I have had the opportunity to act, direct, write and produce theatre. The most important of these was being a member of the Repertory Company.

I loved being in the Repertory Company for obvious reasons, performing for children, and being able to travel all over the city. But while it was fun, Rep was very beneficial. In the Rep Co. I got the opportunity to perform four or five days every school week for seven months. Being a member of the Rep Co. gave me the chance to really

work on my acting very consistently. If I was struggling with something in class, or if I wanted to try something I had learned, I had the chance to incorporate into it my performance immediately. For example I remember learning Vocal Viewpoints in class with Amy Steiger. I would then incorporate these newly learned skills in to my Rep Co performances.

Because we performed so often, the pressure to perform got less and less. Usually I have the tendency to get very nervous before a performance. However, after a few weeks of performing Rep shows, anxiousness and nerves went away. It got to the point where no matter how big the audience was I would not get the least bit nervous. And If I ever felt like I had an unsuccessful performance I knew that I could always come back the next day and do better. Being in the Rep Company was not like doing a six show run like we do for main stage plays. In those situations the show has to be tight and polished for opening night because during the run, there is not a lot of time for the show to evolve. This is not to imply that Rep shows have the liberty to be underprepared, only that they have to be flexible and adaptable to different audiences and spaces.

Rep Company taught me how to change my performance based on the size of the space and the type of audience. We performed in so many different places and venues. We performed in a hospital room, a library corner, a theatre, many gymnasiums, a planetarium, the zoo, and a detention center. We performed for toddlers, children, pre-teens, teenagers, and adults, people of all ages. Most of the time, we would not even know what the space looked like or how old the audience was until we got to our destination. We would have to get to where it was we were going and make the show happen.

In Rep Company I felt like my acting muscles were always being worked. I was more aware of how I was using my voice, and I was always pushing myself to sound better, to project louder, and to use better diction. There were days in the Rep Company where I would purposely try to vary the tones and inflections of my speech as much as I could in an effort to make my performance as dynamic as possible. I was also exploring my body, in different ways, as much as I was exploring my voice. For example, when I played the camel in *A Helping Hoof* I would try every day to commit my body even further to the physicality of the animal. It was always a fight because I had to play the camel for half the show. I had to walk on all four extremities and in large spaces I had to move a lot. Some days it was hard but I would keep fighting, and every day the kids loved it and I was happy. Rep Co. reinforced my need to impress audiences. But it desensitized me to praise. I received it every day. I expected it.

Being the graduate Studio Theatre Coordinator for UofL influenced my acting tremendously. It allowed me to watch, coach and direct actors with a wide variety of talent and experience. As Studio Theatre Coordinator, it was one of my personal goals to make sure people were satisfied with the shows they saw. What this usually meant was that I would give directors feedback and allow them to relay that information to their actors. However, there were a few incidents where the directors were so inexperienced that I was asked to step in and help coach the actors.

The very first Studio show I helped produce was called *The Sea Horse*. The actors and director were not working well together because all were very inexperienced. This was the first time one of the actors had ever performed. The opening date was steadily approaching and this show was in the worst shape it could have possibly been in. The

actors were not off book; they looked nervous; every line and every movement was unmotivated; the relationship was not clear and they were not at all invested in each other or the script. I tried really hard to offer suggestions to the director, but she could not effectively communicate with the actors. We found that the actors were more responsive to me and I started really working with them. The director acknowledged that she could not handle the show and gave up all artistic control. She would refer to me as the new director and if the actors asked her anything she would refer them to me. It felt odd because even though I was only doing my job as a coordinator I still felt like this was her show. However, I was more concerned with the final product so I gladly took charge.

The first thing I did with the actors was make sure they knew what they wanted from each other. I had them talk about their objectives and the various tactics they could employ to achieve those objectives. Next, I made sure they were aware of the given circumstances in the play. I encouraged them to find stage business and to move with purpose. I helped them stay in the moment and focus on each other. I helped with how they carried their bodies and how the way they carried themselves physically would help them psychologically. The more I worked with them their performances started to come to life and *The Sea Horse* started feeling like a play. It was in coaching that I realized the importance of what I had learned about acting. I got to experience first-hand how these tools really worked.

I have been guilty, in the past, of approaching a character without doing any real written acting work. These performances, no matter how good I felt about them, were not my best work, because I had not done any research, scene scoring, or taken any methodological acting approach. This is one of my greatest weaknesses as an actor. I do

not always do proper or detailed acting work. The reason for this is that I am usually very easily inspired by a play and or character. And because I also write plays I find that I can easily pick up on the intentions of the playwright. Thus, seventy percent of the characters I have ever portrayed were played almost exclusively from my own instincts and living in the moment with my partner. Instincts are important to me as an actor because I have great instincts. One of my greatest strengths as an actor is that I always force myself to live in the moment with my partner. As I live in the moment I allow my very vivid imagination and heightened sense of creativity to propel me through the work.

However, in the recent past I have come to realize exactly how important it is to prepare for a character. This particular process of playing Leland challenged me in this way. Because this was my thesis I did extensive character work. When rehearsals started I was ready to work. I was nervous but I expected things to go well.

## SECTION FIVE

### Rehearsal Expectations

*Gus Edwards: In theatre, the word commitment is always being thrown around in a loose and imprecise fashion. So I put it to you. What does commitment or total commitment mean in terms of playing a character or interpreting a role?*

*Douglas Turner Ward: Total commitment means that I start from the premise that the project is worthy and the professional demands it makes are worth it. Then I am totally committed to what the project requires of me. If it demands representation of the broadest range of human experience and behavior, concerning situations both real and imaginative, then I can commit myself seriously to being a vessel for contributing in my area, which is performing. That is my role in the enterprise and I am fully committed to doing it.<sup>14</sup>*

After auditions in November the cast was as follows: Billy Flood as Guy, Aj Green as Sam, Kristi Papillier as Delia, and Jacqueline Thompson as Angel. Auditions were tremendous amount of fun. Professor Burton allowed Jacqueline and I to sit in on auditions, read with the actors, and give our opinions about their work. Auditions were also the first time I was able to act the character out in front of others. I did not have to say much but it solidified for me that fact that the process was actually starting.

At this university the typical rehearsals have been about six weeks long. For this show, however, things were very different. We did not get the typical six weeks of rehearsal most UofL productions receive. Starting rehearsals on the January third and opening February first meant we had less than a month to rehearse. This meant a rehearsal period two weeks shorter than the typical UofL production.

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<sup>14</sup> Edwards, Ward p. 63

My habit in the past has been to get very bored with rehearsals because they take too long. When I was in the *Colored Museum* the fall of 2010 we had a standard six week rehearsal process, I only had two monologues. At the end of the second week I felt good about the pieces. By the end of the third week I could feel myself peaking. At the end of the fourth week I was bored. For *Blues* I appreciated the length of time we had. There was no time for games. We all knew we had to be about business and we were. I was never bored. I always felt challenged.

The read through for the play was on December 7, 2011. It was better than any other read-through I have experienced at this university. All cast members seemed to fit their parts perfectly. It was almost as if their particular part was written for them. Everyone already had a deep understanding of not only their character, but their character's dramatic function in the play.

Professor Burton required that the cast be off book with lines memorized on the first day of rehearsal January 3, 2012. My only other experience like this at UofL was while in the *Colored Museum*. Again my part in that play was very small and so being off book for that show was not challenging at all. However, being off book on the first day of rehearsal for *Blues* meant that I would have to spend winter break memorizing lines.

My method for memorizing is a simple one I picked up while pursuing my undergraduate studies. I start at the top of a scene that my character is in. I write out the last few words of my cue line and then the first letter of every word in my actual line. For example,

Angle: Hot enough for you?

Leland: Yes ma'am.

Angel: You're not from around here are you?

Leland: I'm from Alabama

Angel: Well you a long way from home Alabama.

Leland: My name is Leland (p. 23).

For memorization I wrote it out like this:

Angel: . . . enough for you?

Leland: Y M.

Angel: . . . around here are you?

Leland: I F A.

Angel: . . . home Alabama

Leland: M N I L.

I prefer this method for a number of reasons. It allows me to memorize word perfect. I rarely got line notes after rehearsals because of this method. It allows me to be able to explore the dialogue early on without being in the script. It forces me to recall the words without looking at the script too often. Surprisingly, I can memorize a lot quicker this way. So, over break I did this for both acts of the script, which I had successfully memorized for the first day of rehearsals. I was ready to begin work on my thesis.

I always wore rehearsal clothes. In a period piece like *Blues*, the clothing is very important. It dictates how the characters move. I wore a suit jacket, tie, dress pants and dress shoes every rehearsal. I wanted to get used to allowing Leland to live in my body. The first step to doing that was to wear his clothes.

Before each rehearsal I did a short warm up. This usually consisted of light stretching and deep breathing to help me relax, vocal ladders, and a few articulators. The



vocal ladders usually consisted of lip vibrations where I would sing up and down the scale from the highest pitch I could make to the lowest. For articulators I always rap. Rap lyrics are a great way to awake the mouth box, stretch the mouth box, and say a lot of tricky words very quickly. Another reason I prefer rapping as a warm up, is it forces me to engage my breath as I say words. I like to use Busta Rhyme. He raps really fast and if I want to say one of his song verse I have to be connected to my breath in order to succeed. I always made sure to do some type of warm up. I knew we did not have a lot of time. I wanted to make sure that I was always ready for rehearsals: vocally, physically, and mentally.

The first few rehearsals allowed me to take in all of the individuals involved; I took in their personality types, all the different actors and their ways of approaching the process, but most importantly the way in which our director worked. My cast mates seemed very serious about the project and every one was always ready and eager to work. This was refreshing. I have had few experiences where all of the actors involved were as talented, patient, easy to get along with, and fun as this cast. Since I have been at UofL I have not had a more pleasant experience working on a production. Very early on the cast was able to build a strong sense of trust and community. I appreciated this a great deal.

It was apparent early on that Burton had a clear vision for the production. Still, I always felt like I was allowed to make suggestions. I rarely made them I could have. I was, however, frustrated with the early process. Burton was only focused on blocking. She was not terribly worried about acting for at least the first two weeks of rehearsal. I likened her process to that of the human body. She wanted put the skeleton together first, then the inner organs of the play, and finally the polished exterior.

I have worked with directors who have this approach many times. In these situations we would always come into rehearsals with our scripts, walk through the blocking and write it down as we went along. This situation was different. We came in memorized. We were never married to a script. We had the freedom to connect with our partners, to make bold choices, to try new and different things very early on. It was great. As we blocked the play I found that I was able to connect with my scene partners in ways I would not be able to if we had all been looking at a script. This made me unbelievably insecure. This is why I was frustrated.

I was enjoying the process, but I was not getting any feedback about my acting. I expected to. I knew that we were still establishing, securing, and fixing the blocking. And even though the first two weeks were not about acting I needed feedback. I expected a yes or a no, or a this works, or that does not. I was stepping into a character very different from me in so many ways. From the way we walk and talk to our core values and beliefs, Gary Brice and Leland Cunningham are very different. Plus, this was my thesis. I know that the thesis is essentially just another role, but at the time it was so much more. I expected to do great but not without work. I could not work without feedback. This thesis was supposed to be measuring what I had learned in my graduate program. I wanted to at least look like I had learned something.

The pressure of the thesis was taking a toll. I was secretly questioning every character choice I made. I found myself watching professor Burton very closely to see if I could gauge her satisfaction. I worried about whether or not I *was* doing what she wanted, or if I was doing what she wanted but *not* doing it well. I worried yet I was afraid to approach her. It felt like my other cast mates seemed sure about the work they were

doing. I certainly did not want to seem like the weak link in her eyes or my own, even though I felt like it. I also did not want her to feel like I was a needy actor who was constantly fishing for compliments or criticism.

Looking back I do not believe Professor Burton would have allowed me to do bad work. I know she would not. I did however get a strong sense that she was allowing me a lot more freedom with the role because it was my thesis. I could not get over the notion that she was not one-hundred percent honest about her satisfaction with my character. This crisis forced me to think critically about my strengths and weaknesses. I figured if I could pin point these, I could be aware of them in rehearsals. I could play up my acting strengths, and I could actively work on my acting weaknesses.

Strengths:

1. I connect with my scene partners very directly.
2. I have a vivid imagination.
3. I am creative.
4. I have strong acting instincts
5. I am connected to my body.
6. I feel very comfortable on stage.
7. I can command the attention of an audience.

Weaknesses:

1. I can be over dramatic.
2. I do not always do character work.
3. I seek to please audiences.
4. I can be a lazy artist if I am not challenged.

5. I get distracted easily.
6. I value product over process.
7. I am not comfortable playing lead female love interest.

In the recent past I have come to realize exactly how important it is to prepare for a character. Although I am easily inspired, I am not always inspired. This particular process of playing Leland challenged me in this way. Because this was my thesis I wanted to conduct extensive character work. It was called for, not because this was my thesis, but because it did not inspire me the way other roles have. This is a character who does not inspire me the way Miss Roj did in *The Colored Museum*, of the way Corrin did in *As You Like It*. This is not to say that I was not excited about playing this character. I was very excited to play him because he does not inspire me and so the challenge with the role lies in playing a character who does not easily play to my inspiration, imagination, or sense of creativity.

I consider myself to be a character actor. I have not usually considered myself to be a lead female love interest. However lots of people have looked at me and told me that I very easily could be. This is a weakness. And it lies in my confidence. However, playing James in *A Perfect Wedding* showed me that I can be that sort of actor if I put in the work that the character needs. The difference is that *A Perfect Wedding* was a comedy. I love comedy. I do not know that I would list it as strength but I love to do it. I feel comfortable doing comedy. I also feel very comfortable playing highly emotional situations. I would consider my ability to commit to very intense emotional states one of my greatest strengths, or so I thought.

Leland challenged me to overcome my weaknesses. For this particular character it was important that I do serious character work. For example, serious character work is a full detailed character analysis of Leland.<sup>15</sup> I would also need to have a full detailed scene score for every scene with all of his objectives, tactics, beat changes, and obstacles clearly marked. Playing this role was the perfect opportunity to seriously apply the techniques and methods I have learned since I have been studying acting.

Still, I remember there were always moments I felt awkward. One was the final scene I had with Angel. She tells Leland that she has lost the baby due to miscarriage. For the longest time I could not figure out why I was struggling with this scene. Usually, Angel would very casually tell me she lost the baby and I was supposed to have a deeply emotional reaction. I remember doing that scene and every day felling like I was forcing tears, forcing a reaction, forcing the movement. I was forcing every moment past that revelation. I could feel the falseness of the scene. I never got an acting note about Leland emotional reaction in that scene. I expected to.

One day Professor Burton asked if there were any scenes we did not feel good about. If we wanted to work those moments, this was the time to do it. So I raised my hand and said that I had been having trouble with this particular scene because it never felt honest. So we ran the scene a couple of times and not much changed. She asked what I thought was wrong with the scene. I did not want to offend my fellow actor.

When I heard the line “There’s no more baby, I had a miscarriage” I never believed it. Ever. There was no way I could possibly say that without offending a friend I know hates receiving “notes” from other actors. So I simply said “I don’t believe it.” The

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix A

thing that I did not believe was my partner. Everyone else was left to think I was talking about myself. Professor Burton replied, “You’re a good enough actor, I’m sure by the time we open you’ll be snoring and crying all over the stage. I am not worried about it.” Usually I am great at these moments. This role was causing me trouble. I have only experienced that a limited number of times. I did not expect that.

I connect really well with a partner. When I am in a scene with an actor and our eyes are locked and we both know our words I feel like I am at my best. I allow myself to become very sensitive to my partners reactions, as well as emotional habits and qualities. I can feel what’s going on with my partners. I am very aware of them and I allow myself to very quickly react to what my partners give me. I do not depend on my fellow actor to provide all the energy in the scene. I realize that is just as important for me to make bold and exciting choices and to play an interesting action to my partner. However there are moments in a play where certain characters have the responsibility of accelerating the dramatic action and those moments should never be casual. It also did not help that the director assumed that I would be fine later. No! I needed help in a major way and I needed it immediately. But I instead of protesting I agreed with her and we all went home.

I tried the things I had been taught to make this moment work for myself. One method I used was Stanislavsky’s “Magic If”, which asks the actor to simply change his relationship to the situation so that it feels more personal. So, I pretended Angel was telling me my mother had cancer. My mother did have cancer some years back and I wanted to play with this image to see if this would produce the reaction I wanted. It did

not work. So, with rehearsals winding down I decided to contrast the mood of the character and rely on that so that I would not have to force a false emotional state.

In Leland's final scene, when he enters with the rocking chair I raised the level of expectations and allowed myself to be extremely happy fully expecting Angel to be as happy about our new life. By setting extremely positive expectations for the character, bad news would give me a nice journey from happiness in to sadness. I would not have to force being saddened by the miscarriage when she told me and I could take my time with the moments that followed.

Other than the initial insecurities and concerns I had about the character this was the only other major challenge I faced in rehearsals. Of course there were minor challenges like kissing Jacqueline. The issue with kissing her had nothing to do about being unsure about playing a romantic scene with a female; it was the female I had to play it with. Jackie has been one of my closest classmates. More than anything she has been like an aunt or older sister. The idea of my lips meeting her lips felt absolutely foreign and if we could have avoided it would have never taken place.

Once we got to that part we would both freeze up and not kiss. It got to the point where both our director and assistant director had to make us go through with it. The first few nights we kissed were awkward. This, however, was not what our director wanted. There was more pressure put on us to take this particular scene to the next level romantically. And we did. Eventually we were able to overcome our hesitation and night by night the scene got closer to where it needed to be. By the time we performed for the crew we were able to give the kiss everything it needed to be passionate and dynamic.

Looking back on this process I should have fully trusted my director and my scene partners. When I did not, I should have talked to them. I did not talk to them because I expected things to work themselves out. But, any concerns I had about the process were put to rest once I received my mid-semester evaluation. Professor Burton wrote the follow in:

Gary was committed to this play from the start and surprised me by requesting the role of Leland. He understood that if he were not believable as a heterosexual man in love with the Angel, that he would be cast as Guy instead, but throughout auditions for the rest of the characters his portrayal was consistent and in my opinion, believable. Gary started his research before school let out in Spring 2011 having explored the character's religious background, region and dialect. He began rehearsals completely prepared and full of enthusiasm. He maintained his commitment, energy, and discipline throughout rehearsal, trying different approaches to the character and attempting to discover that perfect balance of country charm and staunch conservatism that would allow the audience to accept him in the world of the play. This was a challenging process as he strove to find and keep that balance for the run of the show. Although it was a bit after we opened he did achieve the balance we were looking for and created a character that the women in the audience all rooted for - until his potential for violence is unleashed just before the climax. I commend Gary for his outstanding work on this difficult role.<sup>16</sup>

As I read this I wonder, why I allow myself to be so stressed. Everything she said lined up with her actions in rehearsals. I did not expect them to. They did. I was frustrated with my director and fellow actor because of my own insecurities. It was because I was not used to working outside my comfort zone.

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<sup>16</sup> Midterm Review, March 21, 2012



## SECTION SIX

### The Final Expectation

*Gus Edwards: The critics are always having their say as part of a career whose end is public performance. What are your thoughts?*

*Douglas Turner Ward: Being criticized is part of the process. It is natural in theatre. It's the nature of the profession, and nobody is immune to it. Actors are putting themselves on the line and are therefore more vulnerable and more thin-skinned. Even with us as writers, it's almost like a part of us is separate for the work. We say, well, so and so didn't like my writing but I'm still me. They didn't talk about me personally they just talked about an outgrowth, my writing. But the only thing actors get put down for is the self. So of course they are more vulnerable, and more subject to being affected by and sensitive about it. You're naked up there; part of the work is using yourself. Therefore the likelihood is that given enough time, you're going to have some nasty things said about you. You have to learn how to respond to that.<sup>17</sup>*

A close friend regularly has dinners at her house where she cooks Nigerian food.

Our friends get together in fellowship, talk about social issues, and have fun. A few weeks after *Blues* closed we had another of our dinners. I recall playing a game of cards. I knew my partner and one of our opponents; I did not know the other opponent. He was a young, polite, attractive, well dressed African-American male with a deep smooth voice and charismatic smile.

As we played the game a friend drew on our score sheet. She had attempted to draw my name in block graffiti letters. After another hand I looked at her drawing and under my name in graffiti letters was the name Leland. I looked at my name and the Leland right under it and I assumed that she had seen the show. I looked at her in amazement and asked,

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<sup>17</sup> Edwards, Ward 26.

*Oh so you saw the show?* I expected her to say yes.

To my surprise she replied, *What show?*

*Blues for an Alabama Sky?*

*No, why do you ask,* she replied.

Because you wrote the name Leland.

*No,* she exclaimed, *His name is Leland* as she pointed to my other opponent.

Suddenly my life did not make any sense. In twenty-four years I had never met a man named Leland. I do a play, my MFA thesis, I play a character named Leland, and two weeks later I am playing cards with him. I thought this, but I was not really playing cards with him.

I went from being shocked by the strange coincidence to being amazingly intrigued. He was not what I expected. He seemed perfect. He was very different from my Leland. He was better than my Leland. In my mind this guy was everything my Leland probably should have been.

He wore the name Leland flawlessly. The way he walked, the way he talked, the way he dressed, he was one of the most charismatic people I have ever met in my entire life. He was fun and I enjoyed being around him.

I found myself comparing my Leland to this Leland, maybe because the show was still fresh, or maybe because of this process of extreme self-analysis. I thought this was a divine coincidence. God was laughing at me. I suddenly felt silly. I was not comparing him to my art. I was comparing him to myself. The Leland I brought to life was supposed to be an extension of my artistry. He was not a real person. The Leland I created was not me. He was an extension of my art. Why, two weeks after the show closed was I realizing

this? This guy had his own life and experience. Comparing me to him by way of a character I performed was dangerous and irresponsible.

This was a major learning moment for me. I was comparing my art to someone real, as if the art was a real person. What went wrong? When the actor acts, he takes the character as it is on the page and he fastens it to himself. He is himself playing the character and nothing else. He creates the illusion that he is the character. He is himself first and himself as the character second. He is never the actual character.

I never thought I was Leland. Still I was taking this thing way too serious. I was taking it too far. By comparing me to this guy delegitimizes both me and my art. The Leland I met had distinguishable traits that made him unique. So do I. So does Leland Cunningham. Wishing that my Leland was this Leland meant that I was for those few moments negating myself. Because in those moments, I was not good enough and my work was not good enough.

I let this entire process overwhelm me. I allowed myself to be unsure, insecure and unaware. Still I hid behind high expectations. I expected to do well. I expected people to love, adore, and praise my work. I expected these things because I have received them in the past, at church, at Western, at UofL, and in other theatrical experiences. I am talented, but I am lucky. I have done well because I have performed a lot characters that inspired me. Leland was the exception that challenged my expectations.

Was I wrong to expect to do well? No. Actors should expect to perform well. I have had a tremendous amount of training. I have plenty of acting experience. I am comfortable and confident on stage. I should expect to do well. But if others do not think

I it, or I sense they did not think so, I have to be able to handle that responsibly. Fat, effeminate, athletically-challenged black kids, have it hard growing up. When they find something that validates them they hang on to it. I have clung to acting because it made me feel exceptional. At the end of *Blues*, I did not feel exceptional and I should have. I do now. *The expectations must die.*

When my expectations were not met after closing I reacted. I was upset, my feelings were hurt and I was sincerely bitter. Was it okay to be upset at the lack of engagement and feedback from my peers and mentors? No. It was reckless and egotistical. Acting cannot be a priority in my life if I let it stop being about art. But when has it ever been about art?

Now. In this moment my acting is my art. It is not validation. It is artistry and nothing more. I will probably perform in some way until I die, but when things do not go my way I vow to never cry. To the thought of acting as a career I say good riddance and goodbye. To the new idea of acting as art I smile and I say hi.

This has been a humbling experience. I have no regrets. I have no expectations. I let them go. I refuse to exist with them. I feel good about my work in this play. I should. And I do. I feel good about the work I have done at this university. I should. And I do. The Leland I created was a unique work of art and nothing more. I am unique and everything more. This Leland was the art of, me, Nefertiti Burton, and playwright Pearl Cleage.

I want to create art for healthy, non-selfish reasons. I want to create it with my full body, voice, and experience without feeding a depressed twelve year old. The time has come for him to grow up. This process has made me aware of my short comings like

nothing before. I let go of expectations and embrace uncertainty. However, I will not walk away from this journey empty handed. I walk away a playwrighting-director who produces and performs. I am an artist.

My thesis advisor Dr. Russel Vandenbroucke told me that he wanted me to take away from this experience with a clearest understanding of myself as a person and as a performer. This was not easy but I accomplished it. This process has been about, reading, writing, rehearsing, performing, and soul searching. Mostly it has been about acting without expectations

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## *Appendix A*

### **Leland character Analysis**

#### Characteristics:

##### A. PHYSICAL

###### 1. Name

Leland Cunningham

###### 2. Age

28

###### 3. Height

6'0

###### 4. Weight

185 pounds

###### 5. Hair & eye color

Black hair, brown eyes

###### 6. Dental condition

A few chipped teeth. No major dental issues

###### 7. Health

Leland is reasonably health. He walks a lot so he get regular exercise to combat his poor diet of down home cooking he regularly enjoys.

###### 8. Posture

Leland is very aware of the way he carriers himself. He is erect and statuesque. His posture is rigid.

###### 9. Physical gestures

Leland does not have many obvious physical gestures. When he is anxious or confused he puts his hands in his pockets.

###### 10. Ethnic background

Leland is African-American.

## B. VOCAL

### 1. Vocal quality

Leland's voice has a rich masculine quality to it. He speaks at a slower rhythm than me. When he speaks every word must be the right word. His voice is slightly raspy. His voice resonates in his chest.

### 2. Vocabulary

Leland is not well read and uses words common people use. He is lost in sophisticated conversation.

### 3. Grammar

Leland may not know a lot of fancy words but he does know how to speak proper English. He can formulate full sentences and honor basic grammatical rules.

### 4. Pronunciation

Because Leland is from Alabama a very particular southern drawl is easily heard in the way he pronounces words. For example most vowel sounds are extended. -Ing endings become -in, most -er endings -a, the vowel sound found in the word cup becomes that of the word saw.

### 5. Articulation

Leland is very articulate even in his southern dialect.

## C. SOCIAL

### 1. Occupation

Leland is a carpenter by trade. In Act one scene five, Guy asks Leland what he does for a living and he says, "I'm a carpenter".

### 2. Education

The script is not specific about the type of education Leland has. I assume that because he has a skilled trade and also live near the famous Tuskegee Institute that this is where he learned carpentry. So it is safe to assume that Leland is college educated in carpentry.

### 3. Social Status

Leland belongs to the upper working class. I don't believe he can quite be considered middle class because he would make enough money as a carpenter at this time.

### 4. Economic background

Leland talks about growing up on a farm. African American farmers were usually taken advantage of around the turn of the century. However this does not mean that his family could not have had a prosperous farm. I am going to assume that his family made enough to live but not be considered middle class.

### 5. Family background



Leland definitely grew up in a two parent home. Leland mentions his mother but I can still assume that his father was around. In the scene where Leland give Angel Anna's ring he says, "It was my mother's and the Anna's". This implies that his mother was married. However since his mother has given the ring away I feel like I can also assume that Leland's father is deceased. Also Leland has been previously married, a marriage that produced a child. Both wife and baby are deceased.

7. Where is the character from? Where are they living?

Leland is originally from Tuskegee Alabama and at the top of the play is living in Harlem New York.

D. EMOTIONAL

1. Religious and/or political beliefs

Leland is very religious. He is very conservative. I assume that Leland is from the Pentecostal tradition. The reason I say this is because of the way he talks about his church from back home. In a scene with Angel he compares Abyssinian, the church Delia attends, to his own. He says, "It didn't feel much like church to me. That pastor was talking more about this world than he was the next one". Angel then asks what he should be talking about and he replies, "About sin and salvation, about the presence of hellfire. I grew up under the Pentecostal tradition and the idea of focusing on sin, hell and after life is a big theme in that tradition.

2. Likes

Leland likes the simple things in life. For example, towards the end of the play he talks about "missing that Alabama sky where the stars are so thick it's as bright as day". Leland likes to work. The evidence of this can be seen in his building of the rocking chair. He likes to walk. He likes the company of good people. He likes to look nice. He likes to honor God.

3. Dislikes

He dislikes sin. He dislikes things that are against God.

4. Desires

Leland desires to marry and start a family. He desires to have a son. He desires to honor God and to live with Jesus Christ as his lord and savior.

5. Prejudices

Because Leland is conservative, a number of his prejudices come up over the course of the play. He is against the drinking of alcoholic beverages. He is against abortion, birth control, or any other method of family planning. He is against homosexuality.

6. Hopes

Leland hopes that he can change Angel. He sees her in her sinful ways and he hopes that he can save her. She looks exactly like his dead wife. Leland hopes that he can have his family back through Angel.

#### E. CHARACTER TRAITS

##### 1. Sincerity

Leland is sincere in everything he does. He tries very hard to be a perfect gentleman. Every word he says no matter how backwards it may sound comes from a place of honesty.

##### 2. Humility

Leland is extremely humble. He humbles himself before God and before his fellow man.

##### 3. Personal values and morals

Leland's values correspond to those of the Christian tradition. He values the bible and its teachings. He tries to the best of his abilities to live his life according to the moral code the bible lays out. He values spirituality although I am not sure he knows what spirituality is.

##### 4. Emotional control

Leland tries to maintain a level of emotional control. I believe that he comes from a tradition where men do not cry. Until the very end of the play, Leland maintains a fair amount of emotional control. It is not until the news about Angel aborting the baby that he finally loses that control and murders Sam.

#### F. PERSONALITY TRAITS

##### 1. Enthusiasm

Leland has a high level of enthusiasm. He attacks life with energy, electricity and excitement.

##### 2. Mood

Leland is not a moody person. His mood and temperament stay about the same until the final moments of the play.

##### 3. Warmth

Leland is a very warm character who ironically enough has a strange fascination with fire.

##### 4. Energy

Leland is the type of person who always tries to operate with positive energy.

##### 5. Good Humor

Leland is of good humor, however the world of the play is so foreign to him that it doesn't quite understand his humor. For example during the high tea scene Leland makes a joke about every woman not being cut out to be a pastors wife.

## *Appendix B*

Circuit plan (repeated 2 or 3 times)

1. Stretching
2. Pushups
  - a. 12 regular push-ups
  - b. 12 wide push ups
  - c. 12 inside push-ups
  - d. 12 shoulder push-ups
3. Crunches/ abs
  - a. 20 medicine ball crunches, with reverse crunch
  - b. 20 abdominal twists with medicine ball
  - c. 20 laying crunches with medicine ball
  - d. 20 standing side crunches with medicine ball
4. 20 plyometric jumps with medicine ball
5. 16 lunges with medicine ball
6. Pull-ups and tricep dips (repeated 3x)
  - a. 1 pull-up (up 6 seconds, hold 6 seconds, down 6 seconds)
  - b. 12 tricep dips
7. Plank
  - a. Regular 60 seconds
  - b. Both sides 30 seconds each
8. Mountain climbers 60 seconds

Once I had done this for 3 weeks I would rest for the weekend and switch to the following workout plan, the free weight plan. On this plan I lifted five or six days a week alternating between the upper body and lower body plan.

Free Weight Plan (Upper body) \*\*\*Note\*\*\* I for all exercises I did 4 sets and increased the weight by 5 lbs on sets 2 and 3 then on set 4 I would go back to the initial starting weight. This method is also known as muscle confusion.

1. Stretching

2. Seated shoulder press
3. Chest press
4. Bent-over row
5. Bicep-curls
6. Tricep-extension

#### Free Weight Plan (Lower body)

1. Stretching
2. Leg curls
3. Leg extensions
4. Leg Press
5. Calf raises
  - a. Parallel feet
  - b. Feet turned out
  - c. Feet turned in
6. Lunges

After doing his for 3 weeks I would then switch to my third plan which I called the Bar

Plan. This was also done with muscle confusion.

#### Bar Plan:

1. Stretching
2. Squats
3. Bench press
4. Deadlift
5. Arm curls
6. Tricep curls

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### GARY BRICE

1501 Shelburne Circle, Apt 210. , Louisville KY | 618-974-3973 |  
Glbric01@louisville.edu

### EDUCATION

Alton High School **2001-2005**  
**High School Diploma**

Western Illinois University **2005-2009**  
**Bachelor of Arts in Theatre**  
Minor: African-American Studies

University Of Louisville **2009-2012**  
**Master of Fine Arts in Acting**

University of Louisville **2009-2012**  
**African-American Theatre**

### AWARDS

**Gwendolyn Brooks Academic Achievement Award** **2008 -2009**

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Teaching Assistant to Dr. Amy Steiger, “Enjoyment of Theatre”** **2010-2011**  
-Assisted during Monday/ Wednesday lecture, led section on  
Friday, graded quizzes and written work

**“Acting for Non-Majors” at the University of Louisville**  
**Teacher** **2011-2012**  
-Taught three semesters

### RELATED EXPERIENCE

**President** **2007 –**  
**2009**  
Conscience: African-American Theatre Troupe, Western Illinois University  
-Artistic Director, actor, director, organizing and promoting shows, facilitating meetings

**Graduate Studio Theatre Coordinator** **2010-Present**  
University of Louisville  
-Coordinating, Producing Studio Theatre

## PRESENTATIONS

*"Minstrelsy and Tyler Perry"*

Power Point Presentation presented at Western Illinois  
University Undergraduate Research Day, Macomb, IL

**2009**

*"Black Men and Homophobia"*

Power Point Presentation Presented to the African-American  
Studies Department, Macomb, IL

**2009**

*"The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba"*

Poster Presentation presented at Western Illinois University  
Undergraduate Research Day, Macomb, IL

**2008**